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RUEGEVC/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
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SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS IN ISTANBUL MARCH FOR
SECULARISM

REF: A. ANKARA 0876

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1066

[1](#)C. ANKARA 0944

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[1](#)1. Summary: An unprecedented crowd of around 1 million rallied in Istanbul on April 29 in support of Turkey's secular democracy. The previously planned rally followed a strong statement by the Turkish military on April 27, warning of threats to the secular republic (refs B, C). Within the diverse group, many participants protested Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul's presidential candidacy, believing a president with Gul's Islam-oriented pedigree would pose a threat to the fundamentals of Ataturk's republic. Almost as vocal were those objecting to military interference in the political process to combat the Islamist "threat". Many called for the government's resignation. Speakers emphasized that secularism was fundamental to democracy, warned that military intervention was not the answer and called for opposition parties to unite. The protest was peaceful, and there were no incidents. End summary.

No Sharia, No Coup-d'Etat

[1](#)2. Consulate General staff observed the rally -- billed as a protest against the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) candidate for the presidential election, FM Abdullah Gul -- in Istanbul's Caglayan Square on April 29. The demonstration was organized by a number of NGO's led by the Ataturk Thought Association as well as some political parties, NGO's, unions and chambers. The rally gained a sense of urgency and political relevance from the dispute between the AKP-led government and the military that came to a head earlier in the weekend (ref B). Estimates vary from 700,000 to 3 million but the crowd clearly exceeded the estimated 300,000 who gathered in Ankara on April 14 in a similar rally (ref A). Professor Turkan Saylan from the organization committee said attendance was much higher than expected. Actual numbers are likely to be closer to the municipality's estimate of 1.5 million. No matter the number this is indisputably one of the largest gatherings of its kind in Turkey's history.

¶3. Speeches emphasized secularism's central role in Turkey's democratic system, but many also stressed the danger of military influence in the political process. Saylan, who is also chairwoman of the Association of Support for Contemporary Life, said in her speech that secularism was a fundamental and inseparable component of democracy. "But we also know that military interventions are not a solution," she added. Deputy President of the Ataturk Thought Association Nur Serter meanwhile, called for the opposition to unite against the AKP. The most common slogans echoed those of the earlier Ankara rally: "Turkey is secular and will remain secular," "the road to Cankaya is closed to sharia," and "government resign." There were no flags or signs of any organization or political parties, only a sea of Turkish flags. In some banners, the Foreign Minister's name was spelled "A.B.D.ullah." (Note: "ABD" is the Turkish acronym for USA and "AB" is the acronym for the EU. End note.) Other chants included, "Turkey is split, the imam is delighted," "Speaker of Parliament, enemy of Ataturk," and "history's work is Ataturk's army."

Women in the Forefront

¶4. The bulk of the protesters were members of Turkey's urban middle class -- almost half of them women -- who are traditionally not very politically active. Four speeches were made at the protest, and three of the speakers were female. A woman in her fifties told us that she was attending a protest for the first time in her life. "If we do not have secularism, we do not have anything," another said. They were shouting slogans asking for the government's resignation, but they also agreed that the winner of an early election would almost certainly be AKP again. Very few headscarfs were in evidence in the crowd, but a small group of elderly ladies wearing traditional headcoverings

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passionately chanted pro-secular slogans to the obvious delight of the more typically Western garbed women around them.

¶5. Comment: The unprecedented turn-out indicates that the perceived "danger" of a Gul presidency has alarmed even people who have been politically inactive all of their lives. The massive crowd gathered to protest the erosion of Turkey's secular identity while at the same time recognizing that a traditional military coup would have a devastating effect, setting back many of Turkey's hard-won reforms. The Istanbul and Ankara rallies also served as calls to the opposition to unite against the AKP, something they have not succeeded in doing to date. In the midst of the tense presidential election struggle, the protesters' message of support for Turkey's secular democratic process came through loud and clear. End comment.
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